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SAUDI ARABIA

Political Assessment

Saudi Arabia has proven to be one of the most stable Arab States of this century. For over fifty years, the Saudi Royal family has demonstrated skill and adaptability in coping with the tensions of rapid social and economic change at home and political turmoil and armed conflict in neighboring countries.

Elements of Strength

The Saudi regime enjoys a strong tradition of legitimacy among the tribal elements of Arabia, which have looked to it for leadership for over two centuries. This tribal basis of power has been reinforced by the Ruling Family's close association with the Wahhabi Islamic reformist movement which remains the driving force of religious life in the country. The Ruling Family has carefully preserved its tribal and religious bases, and remains in close consultation with the leadership of these elements.

While the Saudi regime is frequently stereotyped in the West as deeply conservative, it has, in the experience of its own people, been the modernizing force which has brought the benefits of technology, health and education to a once extremely backward and impoverished society. Because of the enormous flow of oil wealth, the regime has been able to distribute social and economic benefits on a broad scale.

The regime's prestige at home has been enhanced by Saudi Arabia's role in the Islamic world as the keeper of the holy places of Mecca and Medina, and, during the past decade, its enhanced status in the Arab world. The Saudis have moved from a defensive position against revolutionary Arab movements to an initiative role in relieving Arab tensions and catalyzing Arab consensus. The perception both at home and in the wider Arab world of the regime's dedication to Arab causes remains the most critical factor in the prospects for political stability in Saudi Arabia, and the leadership has carefully pursued policies which reflect recognition of this fact.

The leadership of the Ruling Family has consistently displayed a talent for carefully building family consensus and maintaining essential family unity, which has been a critical factor in the regime's survival. The large size of the Saud family allows it to permeate every significant aspect of the society, and to remain in close contact with all key elements.

Elements of Potential Instability

The regime continues to be faced with the delicate task of reconciling popular demands for progress with the need to preserve the social and religious foundation of a deeply conservative society. Important elements of Saudi society believe that social, economic and political progress is too rapid and have historically brought pressure on the regime to restrain social change. Yet it is doubtful that any major segment of Saudi society today would choose to foresake the technological and educational advantages now beginning to be made available on a massive scale. A social and religious consensus continues to exist in Saudi Arabia both on acquiring technology and in shading its effects to fit the religious foundations of the Saudi state.

Saudi political institutions have evolved through the traditional structures of family, clan and tribe, with direct recourse to the King's majlis if these avenues prove insufficient to satisfy individual needs or grievances. While these institutions continue to function in a reasonably effective manner -- enhanced by their inherent flexibility -- and with a large degree of popular consent, they are becoming increasingly strained as the population grows and the economy becomes more complex. Although there is today no intense widespread pressure for drastic political change, in time the new generation of highly educated Saudis will in all probability seek better access to the decision-making process. The government has already begun to address this problem and is studying proposals for a consultative assembly and a new system of local government.

In the long term, the heavy presence of foreigners in the Saudi work force raises questions of social stability. The regime is acutely aware of these problems and has long demonstrated readiness to deal with expatriate grievances. Large segments of the foreign community are there for monetary motives and their attitudes are apolitical. The Arab foreign groups -- Palestinians, Egyptians, and Yemenis -- play an important role in the Saudi economy, but they have not exercised a significant role in the political life of the Kingdom.

The Bottom Line

To date, the Saudi regime seems to have succeeded in preventing significant alienation on the part of either the modern or traditional elements of the society. There is no significant evidence of the types of dissension or organized opposition which have normally preceded revolutionary situations or serious internal instability in other Middle Eastern countries. The regime has been extremely careful to conduct its foreign policy in a way that is consistent with the Arab nationalist aspirations of its own people.

Finally, the Saudis have continued to resist aspects of their relationship with the United States which if taken too far would create internal problems with their own people. At the same time, however, the concept of US support for Saudi Arabia and the perception that the US and Saudi Arabia enjoy a special relationship are an important buttress to the stability of the Kingdom.

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